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AUTHOR	Florez, MaryAnn Cunningham
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ABSTRACT

For those working in adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) settings, finding practical options for professional development is a concern. The field has a range of program types, a largely part-time workforce, limited financial resources for training, and varied policies and requirements for professional credentialing or certification. Implementing approaches to professional development that accommodate these factors while providing opportunities for staff to expand their knowledge is a challenge. One practice that has gained popularity in recent years is reflective teaching. This digest discusses the reflective practice process and its implications for adult ESL teachers. Reflective practice is an evolving concept influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories--such as constructivism, critical pedagogy, American pragmatism, and the self-help movement. In reflective practice, practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners. The goal is not necessarily to address a specific problem or question defined at the outset, as in practitioner research, but to observe and refine practice in general on an ongoing basis. The following steps are integral to the reflective process: 1) collect descriptive data; 2) analyze data; 3) consider how the situation or activity could have been different; and 4) create a plan that incorporates new insights. The benefits of reflective practice include the following: flexibility, practicality, professionalism, and sustainability. In short, is a practical option for ESL teachers with limited time and resources available for other professional development opportunities. (KFT)

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Reflective Teaching Practice in Adult ESL Settings

MaryAnn Cunningham Florez, National Center for ESL Literacy Education

For those working in adult English as a second language (ESL) settings, finding practical options for professional development is a concern. The field has a range of program types, a largely part-time workforce, limited financial resources for training, and varied policies and requirements for professional credentialing or certification (Burt & Keenan, 1998). Implementing approaches to professional development that accommodate these factors while providing opportunities for staff to expand their knowledge is a challenge. One practice that has gained popularity in recent years is reflective teaching. This digest discusses the reflective practice process and its implications for adult ESL teachers.

Foundations and Characteristics of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice is an evolving concept. In the 1930s, John Dewey defined reflection as a proactive, ongoing examination of beliefs and practices, their origins, and their impacts (Stanley, 1998). Since then, reflective practice has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories. One influence is *constructivism*, which views learning as an active process where learners reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts. A *humanistic* element of reflective practice is its concern with personal growth and its goal of liberation from values that can limit growth (Kullman, 1998). *Critical pedagogy*, espousing examination of underlying power bases and struggles, and *American pragmatism*, emphasizing active implementation, testing, and refining of ideas through experience, also shape the concepts of reflective practice, particularly in the United States (Brookfield, 1995).

The Reflective Process

In reflective practice, practitioners engage in a continuous cycle of self-observation and self-evaluation in order to understand their own actions and the reactions they prompt in themselves and in learners (Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). The goal is not necessarily to address a specific problem or question defined at the outset, as in practitioner research, but to observe and refine practice in general on an ongoing basis.

> Last year, Practitioner A participated in a series of workshops on fostering reflective teaching practices. As a result, she has been compiling a portfolio, a process that asks her to reflect on, analyze, and synthesize her work. It includes her autobiography as both teacher and learner; lists describing her semester assignments; copies of lesson plans, handouts, and other materials she has used; and written reflections on articles or books, classroom events, conversations with colleagues, and workshops.
>
> This year, she is assigned to teach a beginning-level adult ESL class rather than her usual intermediate level. She decides to focus her reflective effort on tracking l[illegible]ith this new learner group.

The following steps are integral to the reflective process:

1. Collect descriptive data. Reflective practitioners need detail and breadth of perspective as they gather information on what is happening in the classroom. They can achieve this through the data-collection tools they select. Brookfield (1995, p. 29) suggests using four possible "lenses" to create a balanced picture of practice: practitioners' own writings about their experiences as learners and teachers (autobiographies); learners' eyes; colleagues' eyes and experiences; and existing theoretical literature.

> Practitioner A asks a beginning-level teacher from her previous reflective-practices training to observe her class twice and discuss it with her during their lunch break. Practitioner A writes notes about learners' responses to activities on the handouts and lesson plans she already collects for her portfolio. She writes a one-page addendum to her autobiography as a teacher that focuses on beginning-level learners. She also begins an audio teacher's log, recording during her commute home her reflections on each day's class.

2. Analyze data. After data have been collected, they can be analyzed in terms of the attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, goals, power relations, and consequences that they reveal. What happened that was expected or surprising? What theories about teaching or personal experiences with learning are revealed in the data? How do these theories relate to the practitioner's stated beliefs and attitudes? What is revealed about the relationships among the participants? What are the consequences of the practitioner's actions? These questions can be asked of the data collected (Crandall, 2000; Gebhard, 1996; Stanley, 1998).

> Weekly, Practitioner A summarizes in writing her audio log entries. She compares her log with her observation notes and her colleague's observations. She begins to notice a pattern of learner reluctance to speak during activities that prove challenging. She questions the learners about this, but they offer little feedback. She finds herself comparing them to her intermediate learners who offered their opinions and asked for help.

3. Consider how the situation or activity could have been different. Whether looking at the data in the moment or in retrospect, practitioners need to examine alternatives to the choices they have made as well as the beliefs behind them (Stanley, 1998). Considering how other practitioners address similar situations, generating alternatives and asking "what if" questions push practitioners to broaden their reflection beyond the data they have collected. (Gebhard, 1996).

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Practitioner A discusses her analyses with her colleague who prompts her to think of ways to facilitate and foster learner input rather than ways to change her practice to accommodate the learners' reluctance to speak. Practitioner A visits her colleague's class to observe his approach and also talks to two other beginning-level teachers about the issue.

4. Create a plan that incorporates new insights. Because reflection is conducted not for its own sake but to improve instructional practice, practitioners must link information and insights gained from the reflective process to changes they are making in the classroom (Farrell, 1998). The changes need not be huge—small changes can have an impact on teaching and learning (Gebhard, 1996). The important thing is that practitioners incorporate their new insights in their ongoing planning and decision making, observe the impact, and continue the reflective cycle.

Practitioner A implements an initial feedback system in which learners raise one of three colored index cards to signal their understanding of content or an activity. (Red: *Stop, I don't understand.* Green: *Go ahead, I understand.* Yellow: *Caution, I'm not sure.*) She continues to use her data gathering tools to monitor the effects of this practice in her classroom.

Benefits and Challenges of Reflective Practice

There are benefits and challenges to implementing reflective practice in adult ESL. Following is a summary of those discussed by educators such as Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, (1998), Crandall (2000), Farrell (1998), Stanley (1998), and Thiel (1999).

Benefits

Flexibility. The field of adult ESL varies in instructional contexts, learner groups, curricula, available resources, and amount and type of teacher preparation. Because reflective practice springs from the needs and interests of the practitioners, it can address this variety. It can be constructed as an individual or group process, although, because good reflective practice draws upon the input of learners, colleagues, and others, it is by nature collective. New teachers examine successes and failures in a constructive environment; seasoned teachers further self-awareness and knowledge through personal experience.

Practicality. Reflective practice is immediately useful to adult ESL practitioners who have limited time and resources to divide between teaching and professional development. Because it asks practitioners to make connections between what is happening in a specific context and their broader beliefs, it can be useful to those who move from site to site and teach in varied contexts. Opportunities to explore and reflect on new techniques, ideas, and approaches are built into the process, and links between theory and practice are central.

Professionalism. Reflective practice calls for ongoing exercise of intellect, responsibility, and professionalism. It promotes deliberate actions in planning and implementing instruction and ongoing engagement with theory. Teachers improve their ability to react and respond as they are teaching—to assess, revise, and implement approaches and activities on the spot.

Sustainability. There is a need for sustained development for adult ESL practitioners, rather than discrete workshops and conferences (Burt & Keenan, 1998; Crandall, 2000). Reflective practice creates a cyclical process that allows time for reflection, implementation, and follow-up. It centers on development and exercise of skills and attitudes that eventually become a regular part of good teaching. Once mastered, it should integrate with regular teaching responsibilities.

Practitioner A is excited to see that, after an initial adjustment period, her learners are enthusiastically using the colored index cards to provide feedback on their progress. She is now interested in doing research on learner self-assessment and reflection and in incorporating further development of those skills in her instructional plans.

Challenges

Reflective practice requires a commitment to continuous self-development and the time to achieve it. Practitioners should be trained in reflective practice and given time to experiment with and master the general process. Reflective practice may prove emotionally challenging. Some practitioners may not be ready to confront the uncertainty about their teaching philosophies and competence that can be a part of the process.

Conclusion

Reflective practice offers practical options to address professional development issues. It encourages practitioners to generate and share their insights and theories about teaching. If adult ESL practitioners and programs are willing to invest time and resources in initial training and sustained efforts, reflective practice can be an effective professional development option.

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